

# Reddish Egret Extends its Breeding Range along the North American Atlantic Coast into South Carolina

LISA M. FERGUSON<sup>1</sup>, PATRICK G.R. JODICE<sup>2</sup>, WILLIAM POST<sup>3</sup> AND FELICIA I. SANDERS<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Forestry & Natural Resources, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA  
Internet: lfergus@clemson.edu

<sup>2</sup>USGS-South Carolina Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA

<sup>3</sup>Charleston Museum, 360 Meeting Street, Charleston, SC 29403, USA

<sup>4</sup>South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Santee Coastal Reserve, McClellanville, SC 29458, USA

**Abstract.**—We report the northernmost breeding record of the Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) along the North American Atlantic Coast. Nesting activity was first seen in late May 2004, and on 6 July 2004 a nest was discovered with two young chicks on Marsh Island, a barrier island located within Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, South Carolina, USA. Reddish Egret nestlings were last observed within 1 m of the nest on 30 July 2004. This represents a northward extension of ca. 450 km in the breeding range of this species and, for the U.S. Atlantic Coast, the only recorded instance of nesting north of Florida. Received 6 January 2005, accepted 3 June 2005.

**Key words.**—Reddish Egret, *Egretta rufescens*, breeding range, South Carolina, Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge.

Waterbirds 28(4): 525-526, 2005

The Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) is considered the rarest wading bird in North America, with a current population estimate of approximately 2,000 pairs (Lowther and Paul 2002). The species' range in North America is disjunct, with breeding groups located along both coasts of Baja California, the west and east coasts of Mexico, the United States Gulf Coast, the southern portion of the Atlantic Coast of Florida, and several islands of the Caribbean. The North American population faced near extirpation due to plume hunting in the late 1800s but has since recovered much of its former range (Lowther and Paul 2002). Although breeding within the United States remains largely concentrated along the Gulf Coast of Texas and southern Florida, a northern extension in breeding range along both coasts of Florida began early in the 1970s. Reddish Egrets have recently nested as far north as Tampa Bay and St. Joseph Sound on Florida's Gulf Coast and as far north as Merritt Island on the Atlantic Coast (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

The Reddish Egret was first reported from South Carolina in 1934 (Sprunt 1935). This report is now believed to be spurious (McNair and Post 1993), and the first reliable sighting is considered to have occurred

in 1972 (Post and Gauthreaux 1989). Since the early 1980s, small numbers of Reddish Egrets have been seen regularly in South Carolina from April to October, and by 1994 individuals and small groups began lingering through winter. Reddish Egrets were first recorded during Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) in South Carolina in 1994, and have since been observed during the 1999 and 2000 counts (National Audubon Society 2002). Observations of the species have increased along the Atlantic Coast of Georgia as well, though winter visits are still rare (Beaton *et al.* 2003). Reddish Egrets were recorded during CBC in Georgia in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2003 (National Audubon Society 2002). Immature egrets have also been seen in Georgia, including a newly fledged Reddish Egret on Sapelo Island in July 1998 (Sewell 1998). To date, however, there have been no documented breeding attempts in either Georgia (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, unpublished data; Beaton *et al.* 2003) or South Carolina (Charleston Museum files, Charleston, South Carolina).

In this paper, information is presented on the northernmost documented Reddish Egret nest along the Atlantic Coast, and the first confirmed breeding record of the spe-

cies within South Carolina. On 21 May 2004, a Reddish Egret was seen carrying nesting material to the prospective nest site, located on the edge of a mixed species waterbird colony on Marsh Island (32°59'N, 79°32'W), a 19 ha island in Bulls Bay, 4.6 km off the coast of Awendaw, Charleston County, South Carolina, in Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge. Throughout June, an adult Reddish Egret was frequently observed perched on the upper limbs of vegetation in this same location. On 24 June 2004, two Reddish Egrets were seen together there, one of which was in breeding plumage. We found the nest on 6 July 2004, at which time it contained two Reddish Egret chicks, approximately five days old. Both nestlings were present on three subsequent visits, and were last seen within 1 m of their nest on 30 July 2004, the final visit to the nesting area that season.

The Reddish Egret nest was located on the ground in a dense stand of American Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) that averaged two meters in height. The nest was concealed from above, and was located approximately 25 m from the water's edge and 2 m from an open area of beach that was bordered primarily with low patches of Sea Ox-eye (*Borrichia frutescens*). Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) and Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) nested on or near the ground within 10 m of the Reddish Egret nest.

During the 2004 breeding season, at least three more Reddish Egret adults were observed, including a white morph, suggesting additional pairs may nest on the island. The portion of Marsh Island hosting the Reddish Egret nest was eroded during the 2004 hurricane season (F. Sanders, pers. obs.). A large section of the island was left intact, however, as were many waterbird colony sites within 100 km of Marsh Island (Dodd and Murphy 1997).

The increase of Reddish Egrets along the Atlantic Coast is likely based on the contin-

ued recovery of the species in Florida (Powell *et al.* 1989). The successful nesting reported here, representing a northern breeding range expansion of approximately 450 km, is further indication of the species' recovery in the southern part of its range.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Sarah Dawsey, Matt Connolly, and the staff at Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge for permission to conduct research on Marsh Island, and for their assistance and support. We are also grateful to Mark Spinks with SCDNR and Lauren Bolte for field and logistical support. The South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit is jointly supported by the US Geological Survey, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Clemson University, and the Wildlife Management Institute.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Beaton, G. P., P. W. Sykes, Jr. and J. W. Parrish, Jr. 2003. Annotated checklist of Georgia birds. Georgia Ornithological Society Occasional Publication No. 14.
- Dodd, M. G. and T. M. Murphy. 1997. The status and distribution of wading birds in South Carolina, 1988-1996. *Chat* 61: 129-181.
- Lowther, P. E. and R. T. Paul. 2002. Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 633 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- McNair, D. B. and W. Post. 1993. Supplement to status and distribution of South Carolina birds. Charleston Museum Ornithological Publication Number 8.
- National Audubon Society. 2002. The Christmas Bird Count Historical Results [Online]. Available at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc> (Date accessed 2/21/2005).
- Post, W. and S. A. Gauthreaux, Jr. 1989. Status and distribution of South Carolina birds. Contribution of Charleston Museum Number 18.
- Powell, G. V. N., R. D. Bjork, J. C. Ogden, R. T. Paul, A. H. Powell and W. B. Robertson, Jr. 1989. Population trends in some Florida Bay wading birds. *Wilson Bulletin* 101:436-457.
- Sewell, J. 1998. From the Field: June-July 1998. *The Oriole* 64: 93.
- Sprunt, A., Jr. 1935. First occurrence of the Reddish Egret (*Dichromanassa r. rufescens*) in South Carolina. *Auk* 52:77.
- Stevenson, H. M. and B. H. Anderson. 1994. *The Birdlife of Florida*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.